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Edwards, Kasper; Lundstrøm, Sanne Lykke

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Is “Relational Coordination” a new theory for developing sustainable healthcare?

Kasper Edwards & Sanne Lykke Lundstrøm

Department of Management Engineering, Technical University of Denmark, Denmark

Email of presenting author: kaed@dtu.dk

Social capital is a measure of collaboration and job satisfaction, which may also allow for a targeted intervention. However, social capital is only a valid measure for groups that have the same leader. Many processes in health care cross organizational groups and thus there is a need for a measure that may capture this property.

Relational coordination is a measure of collaboration regarding a specific work process e.g. patients with hip fracture or even more specific mobilizing patients. Relational coordination has caught the attention of the medical community as well as politicians as research has demonstrated a positive association between relational coordination and quality of treatment (Gittell, 2009). Relational coordination is also linked to job satisfaction making it highly interesting as a principle for sustainable organizations. Essentially, relational coordination would allow health care organizations to develop care processes that are both efficient and promote high job satisfaction. Such diagnostic use would require that it is possible to measure relational coordination and conduct an intervention based on the measurement and then measure the change.

This study presents results from an original empirical study of 11 organizational change projects in different wards at two Danish hospitals. The purpose was to study changes in relation coordination as a consequence of organizational change.

We measured relational coordination before and after the organizational change using the 7 question relational coordination questionnaire (Gittell, 2009). A chronical workshop was conducted after each project was finished to uncover the nature and extent of the changes. The measured change in relational coordination was compared with the qualitative results.

We found that organizations’ relational coordination score change little – even for organizational change that introduces new work relations and new processes.

This raises questions of the usability of relational coordination and in particular the questionnaire as a valid and sensitive instrument.

Keywords. Relational coordination, organizational change

References

Gittell JH. (2009) High performance healthcare: Using the power of relationships to achieve quality, efficiency and resilience. New York: McGraw Hill.